MR Review Essay

The New Warfare—Ethnic Conflict

by LTC Laurence W. Mazzeno, USA, Retired

During the past decade, the emergence of the United States as the world's only military superpower has brought a "sea change" in the focus of strategic thinking among politicians, civilian analysts and uniformed professionals. While Pentagon war gamers and logistic planners continue to update doctrine and policies to accommodate the new world order, military officers are coming to realize that what was commonplace in both strategic and tactical thinking for nearly half a century no longer seems particularly relevant.

To think the absence of a superpower foe would lead to world peace is, of course, naive. The history of US involvement in conflicts outside its borders since 1990 gives clear witness to the continued need for a strong military force. We must stand ready to protect the country's interests and serve as a component of multinational teams attempting to bring peace to an increasingly troubled world.

As the century and the millennium come to an end, the United States and its allies find themselves embroiled—most often politically, at times militarily—in a series of ethnic conflicts that have erupted among groups whose longstanding animosities have suddenly turned into open warfare. Civil wars in former Yugoslavia and central Africa represent only the most internationally visible among hundreds of battles taking place around the globe.

What makes such conflicts particularly troublesome to politicians and military professionals are the absence of clear rules of law for judging villain and victim and the exceptional ferocity with which combatants pursue their aims. Not surprisingly, both academicians and political leaders find themselves scrutinizing these conflicts with an eye toward understanding the causes and looking for solutions to a series of conundrums for which there seem to be no easy answers.

Military leaders and strategists must devote more attention to ethnic struggles. Like new viruses that show strong resistance to known medical antidotes, these internecine squabbles seem impervious to conventional methods of warfare and governance to bring about some lasting resolution that satisfies all parties.

Although *Military Review* readers may be more interested in the battlefield consequences of this form of warfare, it behooves those who will lead US Armed Forces sent in to resolve or ameliorate ethnic conflicts to understand the close relationship among the cultural, political and military dimensions of this phenomenon. Two recent publications ably address this need; both offer insight into the nature of ethnic conflict, explaining why it differs radically from conventional war between nations.

International Law and Ethnic Conflict, edited by David Wippman (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1998, $39.95), is a collection of essays by leading authorities on international law. The book is the outgrowth of a 1995 Cornell University workshop underwritten in part by the US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. Twelve distinguished lawyers and international relations experts contribute individual essays on various historical, philosophical, political and cultural issues that surround ethnic conflict. Wippman, a Cornell Law School professor is undoubtedly the more erudite and theoretical. The contributors discuss the following topics: the rights of groups with common cultural traits—language and customs—to establish separate states; the rights of established states that are being challenged by ethnic groups within their borders; the role of the United Nations and other regional political bodies to step in to guarantee rights to ethnic groups; the changing definitions of individual rights, citizenship and national identity; and the problem of genocide.

Many of the contributors focus on ways international law has been applied, often with limited success, to situations involving civil strife among various ethnic groups. There is considerable difference of opinion among them about the extent to which international law applies to such struggles, since the law of nations has traditionally been used to resolve disputes between recognized national powers over issues such as sovereignty, borders and, to some extent, human rights. There is significant disagreement among the scholars about the limits to which the international community should go to assist ethnic minorities in their attempts to maintain traditions or establish separatist states. All, however, believe it is necessary to develop some form of law to govern the actions of nations that find it necessary to confront the horrors which ethnic warfare has produced in recent years.

It is important to note that the essays are exceedingly complex and filled with legal terminology. Readers who tackle this book must be prepared to ponder these writers' arguments sentence by sentence. It is hardly a book intended for international-relations neophytes.

On the other hand, *Anticipating Ethnic Conflict,* by Ashley Tellis,

Thomas S. Szayna and James A. Winnefeld (RAND, Santa Monica, CA, 1997, $15.00), offers a much easier introduction to the study of ethnic struggles. Written as a handbook for military intelligence analysts, this slim volume contains a model for identifying the warning signs that one might encounter in countries where the potential for ethnic strife exists.

In explaining how to evaluate the political, economic, cultural and social dimensions of ethnic conflict, the authors provide a succinct summary of how various groups come to see themselves as different from others within a state and entitled to special treatment as a result of those differences. The writers' aim is to assist analysts in reviewing available data to help predict the outbreak of ethnic conflict. The underlying assumption, of course, is that such predictions can help outsiders such as the United States stop the outbreak of hostilities.

Tellis, Szayna and Winnefeld take a systematic approach to their topic, defining terms carefully and reviewing earlier theoretical models' strengths and weaknesses in identifying the causes of ethnic strife. The authors are less concerned with legal questions than with issues of perceived inequities in treatment of subgroups within a state; these, they assert, are the root causes for the unrest that eventually leads to violence.

Although the writers frequently resort to using the technical language of social scientists, they attempt to keep their primary audience in mind—military analysts who require a systematic method of examining the climate of foreign countries to determine the potential for conflict in which the United States may become engaged.

It should be apparent that, if one can read only one of these studies, *Anticipating Ethnic Conflict* would yield greater understanding with a smaller investment of time. Taken together, however, the two studies offer significant insight into a form of warfare that could easily dominate the international landscape for some time. Consequently, both books merit the military professional's close attention.

Lieutenant Colonel Laurence W. Mazzeno, USA, Retired, is president of Alvernia College, Reading, Pennsylvania. He received a B.A. from Loyola University and an M.A. and a Ph.D. from Tulane University. He is a graduate of the Armed Forces Staff College. He served in a variety of command and staff assignments in Germany, Vietnam and the Continental United States and was also on the faculties at the US Military Academy and US Naval Academy. He is the author of five books of literary criticism and over 200 articles, reviews and reference essays on literature, business and military subjects. He is a frequent contributor to Military Review.

Subversion as Foreign Policy

by Lewis Bernstein

For most Americans, Indonesia is an obscure foreign land on the other side of the world having little to do with us; one that suddenly appeared in the news in 1997 as a hallmark of political turmoil and as part of the Asian economic crisis. It now appears that the past generation's economic gains will disappear.

President Thojib Suharto saw himself as a 20th-century version of a Javanese king and economic miracle man. He ran Indonesia as a tightly controlled state centered on Java and brooked little dissent or opposition. Since his downfall, almost half of Indonesia's population has slipped below the poverty line. There have been anti-Chinese pogroms, with the Indonesian army's cooperation, and conflicts between Christians, Hindus and Muslims. Politics has begun again after a 40-year hiatus. Now, as in the 1950s, political pluralism is rampant.

The outer islands' populace has also been restive. The building boom in the capital city of Jakarta and provincial centers collapsed, and buildings sit half finished or only minimally occupied. Shopping plazas sport familiar signs—McDonald's or Benetton—but stores are empty, arcades mostly deserted.

The institutions that seemed so solid when Suharto was in power have seemingly melted into thin air. People are beginning to ask such fundamental questions as: What is our country after all? Will anti-Javanese feelings cause the periphery to separate? Does East Timor really belong in the polity? Will the country divide along ethnic lines, pitting the Malay majority against the economically successful ethnic Chinese minority? Will the country split along religious lines, pitting Muslim against Christian against Buddhist against Hindu? Will the ongoing economic collapse destroy Indonesia? Will Indonesia turn into a state dominated politically by the Muslims?

Indonesia seems to be the antithesis to the idea of tidiness. It consists of more than 202 million people living on about 7,000 islands spread along the equator. The mostly Muslim population (87 percent) shares the islands with sizable minorities of Christians, Hindus and Buddhists, speaking more than 300 languages and dialects. The size of the Muslim population (175 million) makes Indonesia the largest Islamic country in the world.

In Indonesia, Islam is not a monolithic political force because the Indonesian variety is an amalgam of several different intellectual strains. There are those few who look to the Arab world and its intellectual debates on the role of Islam in society for guidance, but the mass of the population practices an Islam resting on a Hindu foundation interlaced with earlier folk beliefs.

Believers are divided on the role Islam should take in Indonesian national life. Some few favor an Islamic state, such as in Iran. Others believe Islam is the only force that can unite the country and favor a more lenient form of Islamic dominance of the economy and society. Many favor a pluralist society in which Islam and other religions can prosper. All must compete in an emerging marketplace of ideas and test their theories against reality.

In his book *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1995), Clifford Geertz, an anthropologist who has studied Indonesia for more than 40 years, calls it a nation of nations—a collection of different islands, cultures and peoples. Geertz says, "And what is needed to join them [together] is a story that convinces them they belong, by fate and nature, politically together."

Indonesia last entered US consciousness in 1965 during Suharto's coup and the massacre of his political opponents and the ethnic Chinese. If any Americans remember this chapter of Indonesian history, it may only be because the period leading up to the coup served as the background of the 1983 movie *The Year of Living Dangerously,* directed by Peter Weir and starring Mel Gibson and Sigourney Weaver.

Audrey R. Kahin and George McTurnan Kahin's book *Subversion as Foreign Polity: The Secret Eisenhower and Dulles Debacle in Indonesia* (University of Washington Press, Seattle, Washington, 1997) details Indonesia's history to the present and the role US Cold War policies have had in creating it. The Kahins do not judge favorably US policy toward Southeast Asia in general and Indonesia in particular.

George Kahin, professor emeritus of international relations at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, was an eyewitness to the late 1940s' Indonesian Revolution and has spent much time in the country. The book is based on his observations over a 45-year period as well as extensive research in the available primary and secondary material. Kahin's first book, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1952; The New Press, New York, 1995), was one of the earliest scholarly accounts of the Indonesian Revolution published in English and is still a standard work for the period. He knew and interviewed most of the major Indonesian political and military figures. Another of his books is *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1986, 1992), which is a meticulous documentary reconstruction. Audrey R. Kahin is currently editor of the journal *Indonesia.*

Subversion as Foreign Policy is about President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his administration's series of unsuccessful attempts to destabilize the neutralist Sukarno government. In Eisenhower, John Foster Dulles and Allen Dulles' Manichean world view (that is, we hold the power, therefore we have the final say), neutralism, if not politically naive, was *prima facie* evidence of pro-communist sympathies. Their efforts involved the CIA, the State Department and the Navy as well as British intelligence. These efforts were practically unnoticed at the time, which is what fascinates the Kahins.

The Kahins fit such intervention into a pattern of interference practiced by the Eisenhower administration in Latin America, Africa and Asia. At the time, the US government viewed these interventions as unqualified successes, frustrating the Sino-Soviet bloc's ambitions for expansion and prestige. However, the authors contend that the advantages obtained were ephemeral, while the interventions themselves have had disastrous, often unintended, long-term consequences for US foreign policy as well as for the countries involved. Indonesia is only one case study; others include Guatemala, Iran, Vietnam and the Congo. Activities in countries such as Burma have not yet received extensive scholarly treatment. All of these adventures involved US-sponsored political subversion as the foreign policy instrument of choice.

Granted, the authors do not present Indonesia as an idyllic place with a perfect political system before the intrusion of a villainous US foreign policy. As scholars, they are too sophisticated to support such a simpleminded point of view. They detail how, between 1945 and 1949, US policy changed from indifference to support of the anti-Dutch independence movement. They then present a discouraging picture of the state of politics during the first years of the independent Republic of Indonesian. Only the hardening of the Cold War and the desires of the Indonesian government to remain aloof from it brought older prejudices about former colonial peoples to the fore in the minds of policy makers. The authors stress this was not limited to any particular political party but was a widespread elite opinion.

From the documents the Kahins discovered, it is clear foreign-policy decision makers feared Indonesian political pluralism because it might lead to Indonesia's dissolution and open the way for communist infiltration into island Southeast Asia. Since Sukarno was a neutralist and thus open to communist suggestions, policy makers thought it would be better to encourage regional dissidents to either change the government or split the country to the United States' advantage. The Eisenhower administration overestimated its clients' abilities, as it had underestimated Sukarno's. In the end, Indonesia was changed from a politically pluralist parliamentary system to an authoritarian centralized state.

After the 1959 failure of US policy in Indonesia, there were only three groups capable of wielding power—the army, Sukarno and the Communist Party, existing in "a tense and brittle tripolarization." The stage was set for 1965's sociopolitical explosion: a failed coup allegedly backed by the Communist Party, an army counter-coup, Sukarno's eventual fall from power and Suharto's elevation, all of which was backed by US approbation and aid.

Suharto's rise to power simplified Indonesia's political landscape and

the US government's problems. As stated, in the 1950s Indonesia was a variegated, pluralistic state. After the 1965 coup, there was only one political actor—the Indonesian army under Suharto.

The Kahins' "A Note on Sources" conveys a fascinating story. They relate that the material for the book was gathered in various contexts for differing purposes over a 35-year period. While hampered by "CIA bureaucratic stonewalling" over the release of documents, they were able to outflank it using material already in the public record that paraphrased or summarized CIA documents. One of the more fascinating was the record of a series of telephone conversations between John and Allen Dulles as well as John's telephone conversations with several other key figures. These records are available in the public record at the Eisenhower Presidential Library in Abilene, Kansas, because John's personal secretary, listening on an extension, took notes.

The Kahins also used published and unpublished Indonesian documents as well as information from a network of contacts they had built up during more than 40 years' study of Indonesian history and politics. As one reads the study, the CIA's refusal to cooperate seems more and more absurd, since it has been able to keep little of its Indonesian activities secret.

This book is relatively short but I recommend it to everyone wanting more insight into the background of the current Indonesian economic and political crisis. The Kahins' carefully researched account details one more ignominious chapter of US Cold War foreign policy in Southeast Asia.

Lewis Bernstein is assistant command historian at the US Army Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He received a B.A. from Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, an M.A. from Pennsylvania State University and an M.B.A. and a Ph.D. from the University of Kansas. He has been a Fulbright fellow and taught East and Southeast Asian history at Brigham Young University and Boise State University. He was a contributor to The War of 1898 and US Interventions, 1898-1934: An Encyclopedia *(New York: Garland Publishers, Inc., 1994), and his reviews have appeared in* Military Review, Journal of Urban History, Journal of Military History, US Neptune *and* Pacific Historical Review. *He is also a member of the board of directors of the Great War Primary Document Archive and a contributor to that web site's* World War I Biographical Dictionary.